

MARTHA & MARY & JESUS*by Dr. Heather Weir*

Luke 10:38 – 42

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

I don't know about you but I could relate to what Elaine wrote in her Looking to Sunday piece this week about being impatient at church when she was growing up. I grew up as a PK – Pastor's Kid. This meant church was the centre of our family's week. Lots of times church was an ok place to be – there were friends and other people and you could get up to all kinds of things when you were a kid at church – as long as the service wasn't going on. I was often impatient for the service or Sunday School or whatever it was that made me sit still and pay attention to be finished so I could do Other More Important Things.

Sometimes I am still like that.

How long will this Boring Thing (whatever it is) take and when can I go back to What Is Important.

Here's the trick – sometimes what I think is Important To Do and what I'm impatient to get on with isn't what should be a priority right then.

Sometimes by not paying attention because I'm impatient for something I've prioritized I miss what is happening right now.

Sometimes this happens in the middle of a conversation. Have you ever spent time thinking so hard about what you want to say next that you totally miss what another person says? I do that, even though I try not to.

What does this problem I have of missing what's in front of me because I'm thinking about something else have to do with this enigmatic little story about Mary and Martha in Luke 10?

Let's hear the story again.

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Many women interpreters of the Bible have spilt a lot of ink over time on why exactly Jesus rebukes Martha in this story. Martha is doing essential service – if someone doesn't pay attention to tasks in the house, especially when there are guests, then there won't be beds and food and baths and all the things needed for life. It seems reasonable that both sisters should share the work of the household. I have read a lot of 19th Century women who write about Mary and Martha and most of them identify with Martha – they run households and are hospitable. These women understand having an important Rabbi in the house means more work to be done! They work hard to let Martha off the hook, to find something other than her proper attention to household tasks as a reason for Jesus's response to her. Most women who interpret and teach this text are puzzled by what seems to be a rebuke of Martha's proper attention to her duties.

Many commentaries note the contrast between practical Martha and mystical Mary. Often this story is set up as being about Contemplation (Mary's better part) vs Action (Martha's tasks) and the conclusion is that the contemplative life is somehow better than the active life. The problem with this conclusion is that disciples of Jesus are called to both things – we are called both to actively serve – what Martha was doing – and to listen and contemplate Jesus's words – what Mary was doing.

Etty Woosnam, one of the 19th Century women I read, puts it this way:

The general tenor of Scripture teaches that the soul must be fed; and if a life is spent in ceaseless work and activity without some quiet time for prayer, meditation, and the study of God's Word, the soul soon becomes impoverished, sickly, and starving. "Desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby" [1 Peter 2:2] "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." But, on the other hand, days passed in prayer and meditation without any works of love to our neighbour and the daily round of social duties, would be but barren of useful fruits. Saint Paul describes the Christian as "Not slothful in business, but fervent in spirit, serving the Lord." And he says to his converts, "This we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat" [2 Thessalonians 3:10]. "That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, sociable, or ready to sympathise" (*margin*). While God's people are pictured as "praying always," [Ephesians 6:18] as delighting in the law of God, and meditating therein day and night [Psalm 1:2]; they are also zealous of good works [Titus 2:14], labouring in season and out of season [2 Timothy 4:2]. Only by labour can life, physical, mental, or spiritual, be kept pure and happy.

As disciples of Jesus we need to both take time to listen to God, AND to be active in service of others. But one of those cannot distract us from the other.

Martha's service was good – what was not good was her distraction in that service. It is possible she moved directly from welcoming Jesus into her home to becoming distracted in serving Jesus, her welcome guest.

We don't know exactly what happened in Martha's house that day,
 how many guests arrived,
 how many were already in the household,
 what routine she and Mary usually had when there were guests.

There's a lot we don't know.

We know she complained about Mary's lack of help.

We know what Jesus said to her – you are distracted by many things, but one thing is needed.

Possibly Martha hadn't spent any time with Jesus that day – maybe she went directly into serving and her attention needed to be with Jesus first.

Possibly Martha was distracted by how much she wanted to do for Jesus, but that particular service wasn't needed at that moment.

There are all kinds of possibilities. What seems to be at issue is Martha's distraction.

Her attention wasn't where it needed to be.

How might this idea of appropriate attention work out for us, disciples of Jesus in Toronto a few thousand years after Martha lived and was distracted all her service?

Martha provides us with one example of a way our attention might not be on the right thing: she got caught up in action and forgot to listen to Jesus. In the book of Amos chapter 8 starting at verse 4, we hear other examples of ways attention is distracted.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
⁵ saying, 'When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practise deceit with false balances,
⁶ buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.'

Here the people of Israel are portrayed by the prophet as observing the regular days of God's worship – the new moon and the Sabbath – but they long for the days to finish so they can go back to their businesses, to their real work, to make money by cheating customers with false measures, and taking advantage of the poor. They feel righteous by observing Sabbath, but they are not righteous because they disobey God's commands. In our terms, they show up at church, but can't wait for church to be over so they can go back to making an unjust fast buck.

The prophet Amos continues by telling people who are falsely righteous in this way, whose attention is not on all of God's commandments, who do not worship God truly, that the day will come when there is a famine in the land, but not a famine of food:

The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD,
when I will send a famine on the land;

not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the LORD.
¹²They shall wander from sea to sea,
and from north to east;
they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD,
but they shall not find it.

The people of Israel observed a superficial Sabbath and did not listen to the word of the Lord, so God sends a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.

Are there ways that we fail to listen to God?

Do we rush through a superficial observance of quiet time or sit through church with a sermon going in one ear and out the other?

If we fail to listen to God, does this become a famine of hearing the words of the Lord?

Since January of this year, Elaine has been talking to us about being disciples of Jesus. Has God spoken to us in any way through these sermons? Have we been paying attention? Are we willing to do the spiritual work needed to grow in faith? Or are we like the people of Israel, superficially following commandments, or like Martha distracted by much serving?

Maybe you have taken on some spiritual practices suggested in Elaine's sermons and you are putting in the work of spiritual disciplines. Are you then working out your faith in active service? Have your spiritual practices changed the way you interact with your family or co-workers? Does your faithful practice and contemplation result in service?

I have asked a lot of questions. I am asking these of myself as well. The story of Martha and Mary has always made me stop and ask God how to understand it. I'm not sure traditional readings get it quite right – and there are a wide range of other options that I'm not quite sure of either. Whenever I run into a story like this that leaves me puzzled and not quite sure, I know I need to pay attention. I'm probably not getting it. But here it is, part of the Bible. How is God speaking to me through this story today? How is God speaking to you?

I am going to give us 5 minutes for quiet reflection – this will seem very long. There are pencils and paper over at the side if you want to write down what you are thinking to help you organize your thoughts. To prime your reflection, I will ask three questions – and read them twice, then start the five minute timer.

What has caught in your mind from this sermon?

How is God speaking to you in this story of Martha and Mary or from Amos 8?

What are you not paying attention to that you should pay attention to?